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Chapter 15

Social psychology and peace

Shelley McKeown¹ and Daniel. J. Christie²

¹Leiden University College, ²Ohio State University

Social psychologists seek to understand how social phenomena are related to attitudes and behaviours, and are impacted by group presence and belonging. Despite existing for centuries¹, interest in social psychology only began to flourish in the 1940s². Motivated by the Holocaust, researchers wished to understand why individuals would perform such acts of evil, and under what conditions these acts would be most likely to occur. This surge in research paved the way for social psychology's contribution to the understanding of peace; a contribution not always recognised by social psychologists³.

This chapter outlines how social psychology has been involved in peace research. It will begin by considering the development of social psychology's focus on understanding and improving intergroup relations. Then we discuss how the psychological study of peace is conceptualised, how this differs from understandings of liberal peace and some current debates within the field.

Understanding intergroup relations

For decades, social psychologists have engaged in research focusing on understanding intergroup relations. This has included: social influence, the power of the situation, intergroup bias, group identity and the causes of violence and

mass violence, to name a few. Research on these topics were often driven by the personal experiences of researchers during World War II and a desire to understand psychological factors that play a role in human aggression. The growing number of studies on these topics in social psychology effectively nudged the whole field of psychology from a rather narrow conceptualisation of the causes of behaviour that drew heavily from personality theories to a broader view that included the power of the situation.

Social influence and the power of the situation

From the 1930's, the study of social influence took centre stage in social psychology and focused on two key concepts: *conformity* and *obedience*. In his autokinetic effect studies, Sherif⁴ asked participants to estimate how far a stationary point of light moved in a dark room. To test the effects of conformity, he asked some participants to report their estimate, first alone and then in groups. Those who reported alone first converged to a group norm when tested the second time in groups; those who reported in a group first maintained the group answer when alone. Similar findings of conformity were observed years later by Asch⁵ in his line judgement studies, where individuals were observed to conform to group pressures in their estimates of the length of a line even when this meant giving an incorrect response. These studies helped to inform the conditions under which individuals are more likely to conform to group pressures. According to the dual process dependency model⁶, individuals conform because they have a desire to be right and to make a good impression on others.

A couple of classic studies on obedience also underscored the power of group norms and altered the way social psychologists viewed evil. In 1961, Adolf Eichmann, head of the Third Reich's main security office during WWII, was tried in a courtroom in Jerusalem for his role in the deportation of Jews to Nazi concentration camps. During his trial, observers were astonished at how ordinary Eichmann appeared. Hannah Arendt referred to this as the banality of evil. Although this idea was controversial, psychologist Stanley Milgram found support for the banality of evil in a laboratory study at Yale University. Known as the shock studies, Milgram wanted to know how far a person would go when given order by an authority figure to shock another person. He used a learning experiment in which the participant was a teacher who had to administer increasingly intense shocks to a learner in the next room each time the learner gave a wrong answer. (Unbeknownst to the teacher, the learner actually did not receive shocks.) Milgram observed that the majority of participants were willing to administer a lethal shock to the learner, a finding that has been replicated in recent studies⁷. This highlighted the true banality of evil and how far an individual would go when ordered to by an authority figure who commanded obedience.

Some years later, Philip Zimbardo set up a controversial experiment that focused on the power of the social situation in explaining evil and tyrannical behaviour. Zimbardo studied the behaviour of participants, who were randomly assigned as prisoners or guards, in a mock prison at Stanford University. Following days of abuse, Zimbardo felt it was ethically necessary to end the experiment before its

completion. He argued that the situation had turned good people into bad apples. Zimbardo later used this study to explain the atrocities observed at the Abu Ghraib Iraqi prison.

Although subsequent studies identified some of the limitations of studies on conformity and obedience, these studies highlighted the power of the situation and moved scholars away from earlier understandings of evil as being part of one's personality or inherent in individuals.

Intergroup bias

In addition to research on social influence, the Second World War sparked a desire to understand the importance of individual and intergroup processes in intergroup bias; referred to as the problem of the century⁸. Two theories that are particularly noteworthy due to their heuristic value are the authoritarian personality theory and social identity theory.

As the scale of the atrocities committed by the Third Reich became apparent, psychologists casted about for explanations of such extreme, aggressive and intolerant behaviour. Adorno and colleagues⁹ provided evidence for a trait they called the authoritarian personality, which consisted of a syndrome with nine components that were believed to have played a role in the mass killings.

Although the measurement of the nine components were a strong predictor of ethnocentrism and anti-Semitism, further research by Altemeyer¹⁰ demonstrated that only three of the nine components were reliably interrelated: submissive attitude toward authorities, a rigid adherence to conventional values, and

aggression toward those who violate conventional values. Altmeyer's construct, Right Wing Authoritarianism, was later contested by Duckitt¹¹ who suggested that previous research failed to understand why these three components correlated and argued that authoritarianism should be thought of in terms of how an individual relates to their group and individual group members. This was an important step as it moved the analysis of mass violence away from a reductionist view (i.e., personality) and toward an explanation based on group norms and strength of identification, an explanation that is consistent with many features of social identity theory.

Tajfel and Turner's¹² social identity theory argues that we tend to divide our world into the groups we feel we belong to. This can create an 'us and them' mentality, where we see ourselves as interchangeable with ingroup members and distinct from outgroup members. The theory also posits that individuals compare themselves with other groups as a means to boost self-esteem. When a favourable comparison is difficult to achieve, individuals may change the comparison dimension. For example, the Black is beautiful campaign in the 1960s was one way to bolster ingroup love and increase self-esteem. While ingroup amity and outgroup enmity can vary independently, under certain conditions such as threats to the well-being of the ingroup, outgroup derogation is a typical result.

The strength of our social identities is said to influence how much we invest and how likely we are to behave in line with our group norms. As a result of its potential, social identity has been used to understand why group membership can lead to conflict and/ or violence.

Intergroup conflict and violence

There are a variety of theories that attempt to understand the causes of intergroup conflict. Some focus on individual processes such as authoritarian personality, some on competition for limited resources such as realistic group conflict theory or the relative perception of deprivation as outlined in relative deprivation theory. Others focus on the importance of social hierarchies and the idea that all societies with surplus wealth have such hierarchies; where each society has a dominant group on the top and subordinate groups at the bottom¹³. Social identity theory explains the emergence of conflict through a group membership lens. The theory argues that when it is not possible to leave the group, when the situation is perceived as illegitimate and when relations are unstable, conflict can occur. Conflict, however, does not always lead to violence. Psychologists distinguish between conflict, which involves the perception (real or imagined) of incompatible goals and may be used in constructive ways to build a relationship, versus violence, which is overt and behavioural and includes the intention to harm another person or group¹⁴.

In an attempt to explain how certain conditions can lay the groundwork for conflict and evolve into violence, some psychologists have integrated concepts and theories from multiple levels of analysis (i.e., individual, group, nation). For example, Staub¹⁵ differentiates mass killing, which does not emphasise group membership, from genocide, which aims to eliminate a whole group of people who share a common social identity. In the case of genocide, he proposes that difficult life conditions can give rise to the frustration of human needs, which in

turn can result in grievances and intergroup conflict when members of the aggrieved group explain their frustrations by developing an ideology that identifies members of another group as responsible for their adverse conditions. Intergroup conflict ensues and gradually evolves as members of the aggrieved group engage in minor forms of discrimination and later more severe kinds of violence that can culminate in mass killing or genocide. Certain features of social organisation and the culture within which perpetrators and victims are embedded can make this progression from conflict to violence more likely. For example, all other things being equal, mass violence and genocide are more likely in hierarchically arranged societies that have norms encouraging passivity among those who witness violence.

Such a comprehensive framework that draws on multiple levels of analysis offers a description and explanation for atrocities such as the Holocaust. For example: German society was authoritarian in nature; ideologies were destructive and focused on racial superiority and the German right to space. The German identity was particularly strong due to the importance of comradeship and commitment to the Volk. Hitler was an intense leader with strong political ideologies. It was expected that Germans would support the Nazi regime; this was enforced through the execution or persecution of those who rebelled.

Theories and research on obedience, conformity, identity and the power of the situation can be used to understand how such horrific acts of evil arose. Importantly, we can use these understandings to prevent the escalation or maintenance of intergroup violence and to help bring about peace.

Improving intergroup relations

Understanding how to improve intergroup relations has been a priority for many social psychologists. Much of this work has focused on the conditions that favour the reduction of prejudice and bring about social change.

Intergroup contact

Conflict and violence often comes hand in hand with high levels of segregation and resulting negative intergroup attitudes. Accordingly, many societies have adopted interventions that are designed to improve intergroup relations especially through the facilitation of intergroup contact. This is normally based upon the principles of the contact hypothesis¹⁶ which posits that bringing groups together, under favourable circumstances, can reduce prejudice. These favourable circumstances include: support by local authorities or institutions, equal status between groups within the contact situation, common goals and co-operation/no competition.

The classic Robbers Cave Experiment¹⁷ provides an interesting example of how co-operation works in intergroup contact. The experiment involved twenty-two 5th grade school boys who were taking part in a summer camp. The boys were split into two groups and only interacted with members of their own group for one week. The boys engaged in competitive group activities which resulted in violent behaviour. To improve relations, the leaders used various strategies but it was only when the groups had to work together to fix the camp truck, which had broken down, did intergroup friendship begin to develop. Later research on bi-

racial learning¹⁸, inter-ethnic relations¹⁹ and contact interventions²⁰ has also supported the importance of co-operation in prejudice reduction.

The contact hypothesis has been described as one of the most successful theories in social psychology²¹. In a meta-analysis of 516 contact studies, the majority illustrated a negative relationship between contact and prejudice²². The effect has been found to be influenced by a number of important mediators including intergroup anxiety²³, forgiveness²⁴ trust²⁵ and group salience²⁶, as well as moderators such social and religious identification²⁷ and group membership salience²⁸. Additionally, friendship formation (direct and indirect) has been established as a way to facilitate the generalisation of positive attitudes towards one outgroup member to the outgroup as a whole^{29,30}. Moreover, investigators have shown that simply imagining having an outgroup friend can promote more positive intergroup attitudes³¹.

There are a variety of models which help us to understand the complex relationship between social identity and intergroup relations. Decategorisation³² suggests that in order to encourage positive contact and personalisation of members who belong to another group, original group membership should be de-emphasised during contact. By contrast, salient categorisation³³ suggests that it is important to maintain group salience in order to allow contact effects to generalise from interpersonal to intergroup attitudes. Another approach is recategorisation³⁴ which suggests that during contact, groups should transform identities into a common inclusive category. Although these models appear to be competing, they are better viewed as complementary over time. Pettigrew³⁵ argues that these

processes all work within the contact framework and the maximum impact can be obtained when interventions begin with decategorisation, followed by salient categorisation and then recategorisation as outgroup friendships are formed.

Research on intergroup contact and the improvement of intergroup relations is an example of the way in which social psychologists have conducted rigorous research within the positivist tradition to enhance our understanding of conditions that favour peace and harmonious relations between groups.

Changes in the Definition of Peace

If one uses the number of publications in a field as a measure of interest, throughout most of the 20th century, psychologists had little interest in the concept of peace. The Cold War era, particularly during the 1960s and 1980s, was a watershed for psychological conceptions of peace³⁶. Numerous psychological concepts, themes and analyses were used in an effort to more deeply understand the causes and remedies for a nuclear arms race that threatened the survival of humankind^{37 38}. A sample of concepts and ideas included: enemy images, mirror images, trust and distrust, destructive communication patterns, mutually distorted perceptions and fear, coercive interactions, effort justification (too much invested to quit), and the psychological bases of the doctrine of deterrence. During the Cold War, peace was viewed as the absence of violence or negative peace. A broader definition that equated peace with social justice and comported with Galtung's³⁹ notion of positive peace was viewed by psychologists as a distraction from the preeminent concern of avoiding nuclear annihilation⁴⁰. However, when

the Cold War ended, Western psychologists turned their attention toward the worldwide issue of structural violence, a ubiquitous and insidious form of violence that kills people through the deprivation of human need satisfaction. Structural violence is driven by relatively permanent arrangements in the distribution and access to resources that are necessary for human survival and its remedy is the pursuit of positive peace.

In the post-Cold War era, the concept of peace underwent a number of changes. In addition to differentiating between direct and structural forms of violence, peace also included promotive processes such as the promotion of nonviolence and social justice. The emergence of a more global perspective made it clear that the meaning of peace and focal concerns were nuanced by geohistorical context. Rather than stripping peace down to a dyadic problem between the leadership of two superpowers, peace in the post-Cold War era meant that interventions to reduce violence and promote peace were more complex and required multiple levels of analysis (from micro to macro) and were best understood with a systems framework in which sustainable peace required nonviolent means combined with deep-rooted structural and cultural changes toward more equitable arrangements in relations between individuals and groups⁴¹.

The social psychological study of peace

Although social psychologists have been involved in the study of peace for decades, they have not always view their work as ‘peace psychological’³.

Vollhardt and Bilali⁴² define the psychological study of peace as:

“the field of psychological theory and practice aimed at the prevention and mitigation of direct and structural violence between members of different sociopolitical groups, as well as the promotion of cooperation and a prosocial orientation that reduces the occurrence of intergroup and societal violence and furthers positive intergroup relations” (p.13).

The authors argue that there are three key areas in which social psychologists are involved in peace research. These include: core social psychological concepts (e.g. conflict resolution, contact hypothesis, social dominance orientation, social justice), directly relevant concepts (e.g. aggression, prejudice, power, social identity theory) and indirectly relevant concepts (e.g. attitudes, group dynamics, political participation, social influence).

Another framework that captures social psychology’s contribution to the understanding of peace is presented by Cohrs and Boehnke³. They focus on the distinction between negative and positive peace, and cross negative and positive with catalysts and obstacles. Catalysts refer to social psychological factors that facilitate negative and positive peace; obstacles refer to social psychological factors that form barriers to negative and positive peace. Cohrs and Boehnke³ use this 2 x 2 matrix to demonstrate how social psychological concepts, theories and themes have contributed to our understanding of peace. For example, social dominance theory fits in the cell that depicts an obstacle to negative peace; interventions to prevent mass violence such as genocide fall in the category of a catalyst for negative peace; ethnic discrimination is regarded as an obstacle to

positive peace; and conditions that favour the promotion of human rights are regarded as catalysts for positive peace.

What is clear from these frameworks is that there has been substantial empirical and theoretical works derived from the social psychological literature to aid the understanding of peace and conflict. Perhaps, most notable is psychology's concentration on the human and contextual factors associated with war and peace. Such understandings differ from other disciplines where arguably the role of the individual and group dynamics are often ignored and such is the case in liberal peace research.

Social psychology and liberal peace

A question that arises in any scholarly inquiry into behavioral or social phenomena is the level or unit of analysis that will be chosen for systematic research. As Lewin⁴³ noted: "The first prerequisite of a successful observation in any science is a definite understanding about what size of unit one is going to observe at a given time." (p.157).

Generally, psychologists have not examined the notion of liberal peace largely because the primary unit of analysis for the field of psychology is at the micro level, typically focused on the individual, rather than the macro level events that are focal in international relations theory. Even social psychologists, who include in their work an examination of dialectical relationships between individuals and small groups, rarely extend their work beyond the intergroup level of analysis. Similarly, scholars in international relations have largely ignored micro level

considerations and insights derived from psychological research. The downside of limiting one's inquiry to a fixed level of analysis is the possibility of failing to detect relations that exist between levels. Hence, macrotheories of international relations, such as the liberal peace, make assumptions about micro-level processes where the dynamics of human psychology operate. Moreover, a target event at one level of analysis may have multiple determinants both within and across levels of analysis⁴⁴.

Whilst there has been some empirical support for liberal peace and the world has witnessed a reduction in the incidence of inter-state war and war-related deaths^{45,46}, from our perspective, the idea that *peace is governance*⁴⁵ relies too heavily on what happens at the state or institutional level to make judgements about individual and group behaviours. More specifically, this approach ignores how individuals interact in everyday life spaces, how they engage with particular groups, how they react to leaders, how leaders make decisions and how decisions are influenced by social and cultural norms. A consequence of this is that liberal peace often makes assumptions about what is happening *on the ground*. This is problematic because it is these very bottom-up processes which can help inform under what conditions liberal peace is likely to work, or not. Therefore, a key question for the study of liberal peace is how to move beyond the narrow confines of state relations and embrace a multi-level approach to understanding peace?

Psychology has the theoretical and methodological tools to help achieve a comprehensive and multi-levelled understanding of peace, though admittedly, psychologists have not been actively involved in the debate on liberal peace. First,

the meaning of peace currently stands in crisis in the liberal peace literature⁴⁷.

From a psychological perspective, sustainable forms of peace require more than just ending direct violence because structural violence undergirds periodic episodes of direct violence. Hence, in addition to ending direct forms of violence, in order to sustain peace, the pursuit of socially just arrangements is also important. Additionally, a multi-level approach to understanding sustainable peace, requires a full account of the psychological, political, social and cultural factors associated with peace. Richmond⁴⁷ points to a number of ways in which psychology has contributed to this more holistic understanding of peace.

Examples include examining the behaviour of individuals, officials and states; differentiating between types of violence; and addressing human responses to war and peace. Importantly, psychological frameworks facilitate an understanding not only of how states relate to one another, but how they relate to the individual in society and how the individual in society influences state processes. A more concrete example of this is provided by Hermann and Kegley⁴⁸ who point to a number of ways in which psychology could be more involved in the liberal peace debate.

First, they claim that psychologists can offer can offer substantial input on the role of individual decision makers, something often ignored in the liberal peace literature. Second, they suggest that there has been a distinct lack of research focusing on how leaders perceive and react to certain situations, something which could be informed by psychological understandings of decision making, cognition and social identity. Third, they consider how leaders react in crisis situations and

outline the importance of understanding individual differences associated with leaders. Moving beyond the traditional interpretation of liberal peace, Hermann and Kegley⁴⁸ highlight how psychological research on social identity and enemy images can aid the understanding of why people go to war. They acknowledge that understanding democracies is important but to fully understand why they may not go to war with one another requires a deeper and multi-level approach.

One example of research that employed a multi-level approach was conducted by Herrmann and Keller⁴⁹. These investigators surveyed 514 U.S. political elite in order to determine whether their attitudes toward trade shaped their strategic choices. Their findings indicate that the decisions of elite to engage, contain, or use force with geostrategically important countries depended in large part on the degree to which they held a positive attitude toward free trade. Those who most valued free trade favored engagement rather than containment or the use of force thereby lending support to the liberal peace hypothesis or the notion that trade encourages peaceful relations at the macro level of analysis. These findings suggest the liberal peace hypothesis may gain support when key decision makers view international relations through the lens of trade rather than power politics. In short, perceptions at the micro-level play a role in decisions that are manifest at the macro-level

Current Debates in the Social Psychological Study of Peace

A number of issues are currently being contested in the social psychological study of peace. Because of space limitations, in this section we

highlight only two of the issues that are being debated: methodological issues and the difficulty of integrating research findings across levels of analysis.

Methodological Issues

Although a range of research methods are used in social psychological peace research, the methods of choice are the experiment and survey research, together accounting for 61% of the methods employed⁴². Researchers use these methods in an attempt to verify or falsify hypotheses thereby contributing to the accumulation of scientific knowledge. A key assumption is that the scientific approach can be used as a means of acquiring and accumulating knowledge because there are knowable objective realities “out there” that can be discovered. From a social constructivist perspective the experiment and survey research methods are often misguided because they are aimed at providing a reflection of the world but are stripped of context and ignore that knowledge is an artifact of communal exchange. The social constructionist approach, as exemplified in methods such as discourse analysis, views all realities, including psychological phenomena not as a result of knowable external realities but as a result of discursive constructions⁵⁰.

Social psychological research on attitudes toward war provide an interesting contrast between a traditional scientific and social constructionist approach to knowledge generation. While survey research on attitudes demonstrates that individuals’ attitudes toward war in general are positively correlated with attitudes towards specific wars⁵¹, when examined in context

through discourse analysis, it becomes clear that those favoring a specific war often take pains to give the impression that they are not habitually inclined to support war efforts, thus attempting to make their argument for a specific war more persuasive⁵². The former approach seeks to strip away context in an effort to gain an unvarnished, objective, neutral and truer assessment of the subject's real attitude; the discourse approach argues that no expression of an attitude can be acontextual.

Notwithstanding methodological tensions, there is a growing number of publications on the social psychology of peace that take discursive considerations into account^{cf.53,54,55}. Moreover, efforts are underway to bring a more critical perspective to the knowledge generation process and ensure that methods comport with the maxim of “pursuing peace research through peaceful means”. Such an approach explores not only how research efforts can produce peaceful ends but also how each stage of the research process can be conducted in a way that that is consistent with peaceful means⁵⁵. The “peaceful means, peaceful ends” approach is reflexive and based on questions such as how equitable is the power configuration in research efforts, who formulates the research questions, who benefits from such formulations, to what extent are subjectivities honored, how are the research findings communicated and to whom and with what purposes?

The levels of analysis question

Another tension in social psychological peace research arises from differences in investigators preferred level of analysis. Vollhardt and Bilali⁴³ note

that one limitation of research is that the focal level of analysis typically centers around individual factors such as racism and discrimination rather than taking into account structural issues. For instance, gender violence may take place at the interpersonal level, yet violence against women is structurally driven and normative with power differences depriving women of the economic means of extricating themselves from violent relationships on the one hand, and norms that encourage violence on women by suggesting that women are of less value than men⁵⁶. Clearly, destructive relationships between people are always embedded in a larger geohistorical context and sustainable peace requires changes at both the macro and corresponding micro levels.

While social psychological peace research can be criticised for failing to take into account macro level variables, research may also be criticised for not being sufficiently micro in its analysis. Earlier we discussed social psychology's emphasis on the power of the situation, as contrasted with dispositional factors, in determining behavior. However, dispositional factors may play a role in peace at the individual level, which in turn may cascade across levels from micro to macro.

Nelson⁵⁷ has carried out the most thoroughgoing research and analysis of the literature on the importance of "personal peace" in relation to interpersonal and international peace. His research demonstrates a moderate degree of consistency between personal and interpersonal peace: people who experience a high level of inner peace tend to be more peaceful toward others, and people who are high in interpersonal peace tend to experience more personal peace, a set of relationships that are presumed to be in part mediated by an agreeable personality.

There also is a substantial amount of evidence in support of a relationship between interpersonal peacefulness and peaceful attitudes about international relations and the converse, though the evidence is equivocal about the relationship between personal peace and attitudes toward international peace.

Taken together, findings from research that begins at the macro level and works down to micro levels as well as research that moves in the other direction – from micro to macro – underscore the importance of collaborating across disciplines. While cross disciplinary work is likely to engender difficulties in communication, the search for robust concepts and relations between them that are able to integrate across levels seems more likely to deepen our understanding of the interplay of micro and macro level events than research that remains within the narrow confines of one level of analysis.

Conclusions

Although peace scholars tend to emphasise macro-level events, social psychologists have conducted research and developed theoretical frameworks that have deepened and sharpened our understanding of social-psychological processes involved in war and peace. Within the area of social psychology, we expect epistemological and methodological issues to remain hotly contested. At the same time, these contests are opportunities to build collaborative relations within the field while reaching out to other fields of inquiry as we join together and embark on a journey to understand the multi-levelled nature of peace.

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